

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF INDIANA
TERRE HAUTE DIVISION**

BRUCE CARNEIL WEBSTER,)	
)	
Petitioner,)	
)	
vs.)	Cause No. 2:12-cv-86-WTL-WGH
)	
CHARLES LOCKETT Warden, United)	
States Penitentiary, Terre Haute (USP),)	
)	
Respondent.)	

ENTRY ON PETITION FOR WRIT OF HABEAS CORPUS

This cause is before the Court on Petitioner Bruce Carneil Webster's petition for writ of habeas corpus pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2241.¹ Dkt. No. 1. Webster's motion is fully briefed, and the Court, being duly advised, **DENIES** the motion for the reasons set forth below.

I. BACKGROUND

During the fall of 1994, Webster, Orlando Hall, and Marvin Holloway operated a marijuana trafficking business in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.² With the help of Steven Beckley, the men regularly purchased marijuana from the Dallas/Fort Worth area in Texas and transported the drugs back to Arkansas. On September 21, 1994, Hall flew to Dallas to purchase marijuana from two local drug dealers, Stanfield Vitalis and Neil Rene. That same day, Hall and Beckley met with Vitalis and Rene at a car wash and gave them \$4,700 for the purchase of marijuana. The

¹ Although Webster received a sentence of death and is currently incarcerated in the Special Confinement Unit in Terre Haute, Indiana, his execution has been stayed pending the outcome of *Roane v. Gonzalez*, 1:05-cv-2337 (D. D.C.). *Roane* involves a constitutional challenge to the method of lethal injection used by the federal government. Webster's Pet. at 2, n. 1, Dkt. No. 1.

² The circumstances that led to Webster's arrest and convictions are discussed in more detail in *United States v. Webster*, 162 F.3d 308 (5th Cir. 1998) ("*Webster Direct Appeal*").

men agreed to return to the car wash later that that day to transfer the drugs. Vitalis and Rene, however, never returned to the car wash and later claimed they were robbed of the \$4,700.

On September 24, 1994, Webster flew to Dallas where he met with Hall, Hall's brother Demetrius Hall, and Beckley. After they discovered where Neil Rene lived, the four men drove to Rene's apartment and knocked on his door. Lisa Rene, Neil Rene's sixteen-year-old sister, was the only one home. She refused to let the men in and called police. Armed with handguns, a baseball bat, duct tape, and gasoline, the men forced their way into the apartment and kidnapped Lisa before police arrived. Lisa was eventually taken to a motel in Pine Bluff, Arkansas where she was held for several days. During the ordeal, she was repeatedly sexually assaulted by Webster and the other men. After two days of captivity, Webster, Hall, and Beckley drove Lisa to a park where they placed a sheet over her head and beat her with a shovel. "Webster then gagged her and dragged her into [a] grave. He stripped her, covered her with gasoline, and shoveled dirt back into the grave." *Webster Direct Appeal*, 162 F.3d at 319. Although she was "likely still breathing," Webster, Hall, and Beckley buried Lisa and returned to the motel. *Id.*

Shortly thereafter, Beckley was arrested and confessed to police. As a result, Webster was charged by indictment with kidnapping in which a death occurred in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1201(a)(1) (count one), conspiracy to commit kidnapping in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1201(c) (count two), traveling in interstate commerce with the intent to promote extortion in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1952 (count five), and using and carrying a firearm during a crime of violence in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 924(c) (count six). In February 1995, the Government filed its notice of intent to seek the death penalty against Webster.

In 1996, a jury found Webster guilty of counts one, two, and six of the indictment.³ During a separate sentencing hearing before the same jury, Webster's defense team argued that Webster is mentally retarded and thus could not be sentenced to death pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 3596(c).⁴ In support of this argument, defense counsel introduced as evidence Webster's low IQ scores, testimony from Webster's friends and family, and testimony from four psychologists and psychiatrists who examined Webster after his arrest.⁵

During the hearing, clinical psychologist Dr. Raymond Finn testified that he administered a full-scale intelligence test on Webster, the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised ("WAIS-R"), and Webster received an IQ score of 59. Dr. Finn also opined that Webster is "clearly mentally retarded." Similarly, psychologist Dr. Denis Keyes testified that he administered two intelligence tests on Webster, the Stanford-Binet Fourth Edition and the Kaufman Adolescent and Adult Intelligence Test, and Webster's IQ scores were 51 and 55, respectively. Dr. Keyes also conducted a Vineland adaptive skills test on Webster to measure his "adaptive functioning."⁶ Dr. Keyes ultimately concluded that Webster functions at the level of a seven-year-old and is mentally retarded. Neuropsychologist Dr. Robert Fulbright testified that he performed several neuropsychological tests on Webster. Based on the results, he believed Webster had significant impairment in his intellectual capacity, attention capacity, and reasoning

³ The Government agreed to dismiss count five.

⁴ Section 3596(c) provides that "[a] sentence of death shall not be carried out upon a person who is mentally retarded."

⁵ A fifth medical expert was presented on surrebuttal to critique the methodology used by one of the Government's experts.

⁶ The term "adaptive functioning refers to how effectively individuals cope with common life demands and how well they meet the standards of personal independence expected of someone in their particular age group, sociocultural background, and community setting." *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision* (DSM-IV-TR) at 42.

abilities, and suffered from limited language and memory capabilities. The fourth expert, Dr. Mark Cunningham, testified that he spoke with Webster's family and examined Webster while he was in prison. Dr. Cunningham further testified that Webster suffers from mild mental retardation

Defense counsel also introduced evidence of an IQ test that was given to Webster by an Arkansas state mental health center in 1992. The test demonstrated that Webster had an IQ of only 48 more than a year before Lisa's kidnapping and murder. Webster's friends and family also testified at the hearing. They stated that Webster had to repeat two grades in school, was in special education classes, was unable to live away from his mother, received income from welfare, food stamps, family members, and girlfriends, and had illegible handwriting.

To rebut Webster's evidence of mental retardation, the Government presented testimony from two experts. Dr. George Parker testified that he administered a partial WAIS-R and estimated Webster's IQ to be 72. He also testified that Webster does not suffer from mental retardation, and Webster's IQ scores were artificially deflated because he was motivated to do poorly on the tests to avoid the death penalty. Dr. Richard Coons, a psychiatrist, testified similarly. Dr. Coons further claimed that Webster had lied about taking special education classes in his youth.⁷

The Government also focused on Webster's apparent ability to adapt to life in jail. Dr. Parker and Dr. Coons testified that Webster made his bed, put away his clothes, and kept an organized cell while awaiting trial. Fellow inmates and corrections officers also testified that Webster had written letters, grievances, and requests for various services, read newspapers aloud, submitted names and addresses for his visitation list, appeared to be reading from law books and

⁷ Two witnesses from Watson Chapel Schools testified at the sentencing hearing that Webster did not attend special education classes while in school.

taking notes in the law library, and on one occasion, Webster complained because he received incorrect change from the commissary.

At the conclusion of the hearing, the jury determined that several statutory and non-statutory aggravating factors existed, *see* 18 U.S.C. § 3592, and concluded that the death penalty was an appropriate sentence for Webster's actions. On September 30, 1996, the court agreed with the jury's recommendation and sentenced Webster to death on count one, life imprisonment on count two, and sixty months' imprisonment on count six. The court also issued an entry entitled Factual Finding Regarding Mental Retardation stating that, "Webster is not mentally retarded and . . . he possesses the requisite mental capacity to understand the death penalty and why it will be imposed on him. As a result, the defendant Webster is not exempt under 18 U.S.C. § 3596(c) from implementation of the death penalty." *Webster Direct Appeal*, 162 F.3d at 351.

Webster appealed his convictions and sentence to the Fifth Circuit arguing, among other things, that his death sentence was unconstitutional because he is, in fact, mentally retarded. The court disagreed, however, noting that "[t]he government presented substantial evidence to support the finding" that he was not mentally retarded. *Id.* at 353. Webster's conviction and death sentence were ultimately affirmed by the Fifth Circuit, and the Supreme Court of the United States denied his petition for certiorari. *Webster v. United States*, 528 U.S. 829 (1999).

Thereafter, on September 29, 2000, Webster timely filed a motion for relief pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2255.⁸ Again, Webster argued that his death sentence is improper because he is mentally retarded. Webster also argued that counsel was ineffective in failing "to investigate and present additional evidence demonstrating mental retardation and the extreme abuse Webster suffered as a child." *United States v. Webster*, 392 F.3d 787, 793 (5th Cir. 2004) ("Webster 2255

⁸ An amended motion was filed on August 16, 2002.

I'). The district court denied his motion, but granted a certificate of appealability as to two of Webster's claims: "first, that the evidence presented at trial was insufficient to warrant the district court's finding that Webster is not mentally retarded; and second, that his alleged retardation renders him ineligible for a death sentence." *United States v. Webster*, 421 F.3d 308, 310 (5th Cir. 2005) ("*Webster 2255 II*").

Once more, however, the Fifth Circuit rejected Webster's arguments regarding his alleged mental retardation and provided the following explanation for its decision:

Webster claims he is mentally retarded and thus ineligible for his death sentence, but . . . Webster's brief does not point to any new evidence bearing directly on his mental capacity; instead, it summarizes the evidence presented at trial concerning his cognitive abilities and childhood experiences.

Webster cannot, however, continue to litigate this claim hoping that some court eventually will agree with him. The question whether he is mentally retarded was, as the district court observed, "a highly contested one at trial," and Webster failed to convince either the district court that he is retarded or, moreover, a majority of the jurors that he is or even *may be* retarded.

Id. at 313-14 (citation omitted) (emphasis in original). Webster's petition for a writ of certiorari was denied by the Supreme Court. *Webster v. United States*, 549 U.S. 828 (2009).

Webster also separately appealed the district court's denial of a certificate of appealability on the remainder of his § 2255 claims, including the allegation that counsel was ineffective in failing to present additional evidence of his mental retardation during the sentencing hearing. The Fifth Circuit, however, agreed with the district court's assessment of Webster's ineffective assistance of counsel claim noting that

[a]fter engaging in an exhaustive review of the trial record, the district court determined that defense counsel presented a significant amount of such evidence; and, although more of the same or similar evidence could have been furnished, counsel were not constitutionally ineffective for failing to present more of the same.

Webster 2255 I, 392 F.3d at 793. The Fifth Circuit further stated:

Indeed, our review of the trial record confirms that Webster's counsel were far from constitutionally ineffective in investigating and presenting evidence of his mental condition and the abuse he suffered as a child. During the punishment phase, counsel presented lengthy and detailed testimony from four medical experts regarding Webster's mental capacity and the testimony of a fifth medical expert on surrebuttal to critique the methodology used by one of the government's experts in testing Webster's cognitive abilities.

Id. at 793-94.

Webster's appeals did not stop there, however. On October 22, 2009, Webster moved the Fifth Circuit for authorization to file a second motion for relief under 28 U.S.C. § 2255. Pursuant to § 2255(h)(1),

A second or successive motion must be certified as provided in section 2244 by a panel of the appropriate court of appeals to contain—(1) newly discovered evidence that, if proven and viewed in light of the evidence as a whole, would be sufficient to establish by clear and convincing evidence that no reasonable factfinder would have found the movant guilty of the offense.

Webster argued that a successive 2255 motion was warranted because he had newly discovered evidence “in the form of government and school records and additional testimony” establishing that he is mentally retarded, and thus, ineligible for the death penalty. *In re Webster*, 605 F.3d 256, 257 (5th Cir. 2010) (“*Webster 2255 III*”). Webster's “newly discovered evidence” included records from the Social Security Administration indicating that he was diagnosed with mental retardation months before he kidnapped, assaulted, and murdered Lisa and a letter from his school indicating that he was, in fact, enrolled in special education classes. Webster argued that, had this evidence been presented at trial, it would have refuted the Government's arguments that he was pretending to be mentally retarded to avoid the death penalty and he was lying when he said he attended special education classes. The Fifth Circuit, however, held that “a petitioner cannot bring a successive claim under § 2255(h)(1) where he does not assert that the newly discovered evidence would negate his guilt of the offense of which he was convicted, *i.e.*, capital

murder.” *Id.* at 257. Because Webster’s newly discovered evidence challenged only his sentence, i.e., his death sentence, the court denied Webster’s request to file a subsequent § 2255 motion without considering the merits of the new evidence.⁹

Webster now seeks relief from this Court pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2241 based on the same newly discovered evidence addressed in his motion for authorization to file a second motion under 28 U.S.C. § 2255. Webster argues that “because section 2255 is inadequate and ineffective, section 2241 is the appropriate mechanism for Petitioner to challenge the unconstitutionality of his death sentence based on previously unavailable evidence.” Webster’s Pet. at 26.

II. STANDARD

A federal court may issue a writ of habeas corpus pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2241(c)(3) if it finds the petitioner “is in custody in violation of the Constitution or laws or treaties of the United States.” Webster seeks such a writ from this Court.

III. DISCUSSION

Before the Court may consider the merits of Webster’s petition, the Court must determine whether he satisfies the savings clause of § 2255, and is thus entitled to attack his sentence under § 2241.

In general, federal prisoners who wish to attack the validity of their convictions or sentences are required to proceed under § 2255. Furthermore, in the overwhelming majority of cases § 2255 specifically prohibits prisoners from circumventing § 2255 and challenging their convictions to sentences through a habeas petition under § 2241. There is, however, a recognition in the statute that it will not apply in a narrow class of cases. This is the so-called “savings clause” of

⁹ The court, however, was not unsympathetic to Webster’s situation, as one concurring judge wrote that the court’s holding, although legally correct, was absurd and “Kafkaesque.” *Id.* at 259. He believed that if Webster were allowed to present the newly discovered evidence “to a judge or jury for consideration on the merits, it is virtually guaranteed that he would be found to be mentally retarded,” and thus, ineligible for the death penalty. *Id.*

§ 2255, which allows prisoners to bring § 2241 petitions if they can show that the § 2255 remedy “is inadequate or ineffective to test the legality of [the prisoner’s] detention.”

United States v. Prevatte, 300 F.3d 792, 799 (7th Cir. 2002) (quoting *Garza v. Lappin*, 253 F.3d 918, 921 (7th Cir. 2001)). According to the Seventh Circuit, “[a] federal prisoner should be permitted to seek habeas corpus only if he had no reasonable opportunity to obtain earlier judicial correction of a fundamental defect in his conviction or sentence because the law changed after his first 2255 motion.” *In re Davenport*, 147 F.3d 605, 611 (7th Cir. 1998); *see also Collins v. Holinka*, 510 F.3d 666, 667 (7th Cir. 2007) (if § 2255 offers “one full and fair opportunity to contest” one’s conviction, a § 2241 petition must be dismissed under § 2255), *Potts v. United States*, 210 F.3d 770, 770 (7th Cir. 2000) (“The essential point is that a prisoner is entitled to one unencumbered opportunity to receive a decision on the merits.”). The following qualifications, however, apply to this rule:

The first is that the change of law has to have been made retroactive by the Supreme Court. . . . The second is that it must be a change that eludes the permission in section 2255 for successive motions. . . . Third, “change in law” is not to be equated to a difference between the law in the circuit in which the prisoner was sentenced and the law in the circuit in which he is incarcerated.

Id. at 611-12.

Post-*Davenport*, the Seventh Circuit has concluded that “[e]very court that has addressed the matter has held that § 2255 is ‘inadequate or ineffective’ only when a structural problem in § 2255 forecloses even one round of effective collateral review—and then only when as in *Davenport* the claim being foreclosed is one of actual innocence.” *Taylor v. Gilkey*, 314 F.3d 832, 835 (7th Cir. 2002); *see also Unthank v. Jett*, 549 F.3d 534, 536 (7th Cir. 2008) (“§ 2255 is inadequate or ineffective only when a prisoner is unable to present a claim of actual innocence”). In other words, a petitioner cannot show that a motion under § 2255 is “ineffective” simply

because that remedy is no longer available, either because the deadline for filing such a motion has passed or because petitioner filed a previous motion under § 2255 and cannot satisfy the requirements for filing a second motion under § 2255(h). *Unthank*, 549 F.3d at 535-36 (citing *Taylor*, 314 F.3d at 836) (further rejecting argument that “whenever § 2255(h) closes the door to a renewed challenge under § 2255, then § 2255(e) must open the door to a challenge under § 2241”).

In *Taylor*, the petitioner was convicted of several drug and firearms offenses. After the Seventh Circuit affirmed his convictions and sentences, Taylor filed a motion for relief pursuant to § 2255 with the district court arguing that “an error in applying the Sentencing Guidelines’ grouping rules had elevated his range by 6 to 21 months, and that the judge should correct this error by reducing his sentence.” *Id.* at 833. The court denied his motion under then prevailing Circuit law without investigating whether “counsel’s failure to call this to the attention of the trial and appellate courts was constitutionally deficient.” *Id.*

Thereafter, the Supreme Court issued a decision unrelated to Taylor’s case that suggested that the district court erred in denying Taylor’s § 2255 motion. As a result, Taylor filed a petition for writ of habeas corpus under § 2241, arguing effectively that “his lawyer furnished ineffective assistance by failing to argue at sentencing or on appeal that his convictions should have been grouped under U.S.S.G. § 3D1.2,” as the Supreme Court had ruled in a similar case. *Id.* at 836. In determining whether Taylor’s petition satisfied the savings clause of § 2255, the court reasoned that “the sort of argument Taylor want[ed] to present . . . has been around for a long time. . . . It does not illuminate any structural defect in § 2255 or present any fundamental error equivalent to actual innocence.” *Id.* Moreover, the court noted that, although the Supreme Court issued a decision showing that the disposition of his first § 2255 proceeding had been mistaken,

“[t]he intervening decision did not . . . create a new and retroactive rule of constitutional law; at most it just showed that an error had been made in applying an old rule to Taylor’s situation.”

Unthank, 549 F.3d at 535. Accordingly, Taylor’s petition was denied.

Here, Webster argues that he is mentally retarded and thus ineligible for the death penalty. This sort of argument, however, is by no means new. *See Atkins v. Virginia*, 536 U.S. 304, 314 (2002) (“In 1988, when Congress enacted legislation reinstating the federal death penalty, it expressly provided that a ‘sentence of death shall not be carried out upon a person who is mentally retarded.’”). Thus, the law on this topic has not recently changed such that Webster was *unable* to argue that he was mentally retarded prior to the instant petition. Rather, it is clear from the record that Webster’s mental ability was a highly contested issue at every stage of the proceedings.¹⁰ *Cf. Felder v. McVicar*, 113 F.3d 696, 698 (7th Cir. 1997) (“A newly discovered factual basis for a claim may permit filing a successive petition raising a new claim, . . . but it does not permit filing a successive petition raising the same claim that was presented in a previous petition.”); *In re Hill*, 715 F.3d 284, 292 (11th Cir. 2013) (Petitioner “cannot convert his previously asserted ‘claim’ into a wholly new ‘claim’ merely by coming forward with new supporting evidence or even new legal arguments.”).

Notwithstanding the foregoing, Webster argues that “[t]he newly available evidence . . . taken together with the evidence presented at trial, proves that Mr. Webster is mentally retarded

¹⁰ Webster argues that “it was simply not possible for [him] to bring his claim in connection with his original petition because most of the new evidence upon which [his] Petition is based was in government files that were neither produced to [him] nor made available to him, despite his request.” Webster’s Br. at 31. Based on the affidavits provided by Webster, trial counsel requested the information prior to Webster’s trial, but the documents were never produced. Apparently, trial counsel did not follow-up on his request. The information was not requested again until October 2008, more than twelve years after his trial and several years after his direct appeals and his initial § 2255 motion were unsuccessful. Unfortunately, it is now too late to present this evidence.

and, therefore, ‘actually innocent’ of the death penalty.” Webster’s Br. at 32. Thus, like one of the petitioners in *Davenport*, he is “actually innocent” of the offense and the Court should consider the merits of his petition. The Government argues, on the other hand, that “a challenge to a sentence does not amount to a claim that a prisoner is innocent of the offense.”

Government’s Resp. at 13, Dkt. No. 17.

The term “actual innocence” is derived from § 2255(h)(1), which allows for successive 2255 motions under limited circumstances. The rule provides as follows:

A second or successive motion must be certified as provided in section 2244 by a panel of the appropriate court of appeals to contain—(1) newly discovered evidence that, if proven and viewed in light of the evidence as a whole, would be sufficient to establish by clear and convincing evidence that no reasonable factfinder would have found the movant guilty of the offense.

Before it was codified in § 2255 of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (“AEDPA”), “the ‘actual innocence’ exception . . . was judge-made.” *Hope v. United States*, 108 F.3d 119, 120 (7th Cir. 1997). The Supreme Court discussed the judge-made actual innocence exception as it applies in capital cases in *Sawyer v. Whitley*, 505 U.S. 333 (1992). In that case, the Court held that “to show ‘actual innocence’ one must show by clear and convincing evidence that, but for a constitutional error, no reasonable juror would have found the petitioner eligible for the death penalty under the applicable state law.” *Id.* at 336. In other words, “actual innocence” could mean “innocent of the death penalty.” Webster argues that this Court should apply this definition and allow his petition to proceed.

Webster, however, made this exact argument before the Fifth Circuit on his motion for authorization to file a second motion for relief under 28 U.S.C. § 2255, and the Fifth Circuit rejected his argument, concluding that the judge-made exception noted in *Sawyer* no longer applied. It decided that

there is no reason to believe that Congress intended the language “guilty of the offense” to mean “eligible for a death sentence.” Had Congress wanted the provision to cover challenges to a sentence—even if only to a death sentence—it easily could have referenced sentences explicitly in the text, as it did numerous times throughout § 2255. Or if Congress had intended to signal courts to incorporate the old, broad interpretation of actual innocence, it well could have used the words, “actual innocence.” Instead, it elected to couch § 2255(h)(1) . . . in the markedly different, unmistakable terms of *guilt of the offense*.


Webster 2255 III, 605 F.3d at 258-59 (emphasis in original). Moreover, since the actual innocence exception was codified, Circuit courts, including the Seventh Circuit, have unanimously held that the *Sawyer* exception did not survive the enactment of AEPDA. *See, e.g., Hope*, 108 F.3d at 120; *Hill*, 715 F.3d at 300; *Webster 2255 III*, 605 F.3d at 258. Therefore, as the Government contends, actual innocence means innocent of the offense—not innocent of the death penalty.

Webster does not argue that he is actually innocent of his crimes. He argues only that he is not eligible for the death penalty because he is mentally retarded. Thus, based on the foregoing case law, Webster is unable to show that § 2255 is an inadequate or ineffective remedy such that he may bring a petition for writ of habeas corpus under § 2241. Accordingly, and unfortunately, the Court is unable to consider the merits of Webster’s petition.

IV. CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, Webster’s petition for writ of habeas corpus under 28 U.S.C. § 2241 is **DENIED**.

SO ORDERED: 11/13/2013



Hon. William T. Lawrence, Judge
United States District Court
Southern District of Indiana

Copies to all counsel of record via electronic communication.